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Double defection of KGB official stuns U.S. intelligence

By Bill Gertz
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Soviet KGB official Vitaly Yurchenko arrived in Moscow yesterday, leaving behind a stunned U.S. intelligence community and an even more baffled general public.

In an interview with a Soviet publication yesterday, Mr. Yurchenko repeated charges he made last Monday that he was kidnapped, "tortured" and drugged for three months by the CIA, even though he was able to walk away from a Georgetown restaurant last Saturday night to return dramatically to the Soviet fold.

He told the Soviet interviewer that his disappearance in Rome was not a defection and accused Americans of "practicing state terrorism in its most amoral form."

President Reagan on Wednesday told reporters that it was hard to believe anyone exposed to U.S. freedoms would prefer totalitarian life in the Soviet Union.

U.S. officials are searching for an explanation of why Mr. Yurchenko returned to the Soviet Union after three months of debriefings by Central Intelligence Agency handlers.

When he first defected in Rome last August, Mr. Yurchenko was identified in a leak to a columnist as the No. 5 man in the Soviet secret police. But since his return to the Soviet Union, some intelligence officials have questioned whether Mr. Yurchenko, in fact, held a senior post.

His position in the KGB is critical to two major theories about the affair. Some analysts believe Mr. Yurchenko never defected at all, but only feigned new loyalties for several missions, and when he had completed them, he walked away.

Experts believe that the KGB's No. 5 man would only have left the Soviet Union under the most extraordinary of circumstances. A true high-level KGB official would never attempt to return to the Soviet Union once he had decided to defect, and family considerations would have been dealt with prior to any leap to the West, they say.

The second theory is that a love

interest turned sour.

If Mr. Yurchenko was the KGB's top North American expert, as officials have said, his defection would have been fatal once the Soviets succeeded in tracking him down, intelligence experts contend.

A case in point is a KGB defector in France who supplied enormous details on Soviet technology collection efforts in the West. The defector was executed in France by KGB assassins, according to intelligence sources.

If Mr. Yurchenko was a fake all along, a view held by several members of the Senate Intelligence Committee and some intelligence professionals, he could have come to the United States to send any of several messages from Moscow, experts say.

One possible message that some sources say has reached top CIA levels is that no Soviet agents have infiltrated the CIA as "moles." Mr. Yurchenko did supply leads incriminating several former CIA operatives suspected of spying for the Soviets. But Mr. Reagan said Mr. Yurchenko's information was nothing that the CIA didn't already know.

One CIA official said that the first question put to Mr. Yurchenko by the CIA was: "Who is picking our pockets?" When he provided information about only former operatives, the CIA seemed satisfied — with some prudent reservations — that no moles had penetrated the agency. Certainly, no conspicuous defections of American spies occurred as a result of Mr. Yurchenko's arrival.

But speculation over KGB penetration of the CIA could have succeeded in sowing discord between agency headquarters and numerous field agents scattered around the world. Experts speculate that this demoralization could have been one aim of Mr. Yurchenko if he was a plant.

Mid-Atlantic Research Associates, a Baltimore-based research center specializing in intelligence matters, believes Mr. Yurchenko's return to the Soviet compound in Washington without fear of KGB retribution is a clear indication he was working for the Soviets all along.

"It is a viable supposition that the

Yurchenko defection was a pre-planned Soviet intelligence operation, and that when Vitaly Yurchenko returned to the embassy, he was confident he faced not punishment but rewards for a job well done," a MARA analysis of the Yurchenko affair states.

MARA believes the Yurchenko case was a deliberate response to the defection last May in Great Britain of top KGB official Oleg Gordievski. By sending Mr. Yurchenko, whose preparation for the operation may have included having his picture appear in a June issue of Pravda along with a number of top KGB officials, the Soviets hoped to disrupt U.S. intelligence and perhaps confuse the West about details supplied to Western intelligence agencies by Mr. Gordievski, the analysis states.

The Senate Intelligence Committee has demanded that the Yurchenko affair be investigated by someone outside the CIA's counterintelligence section and security office, according to a committee source.